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# Secrecy Foils Probers of Uranium Loss

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After a year of digging into the largest unexplained loss of bomb-grade uranium in U.S. history, investigators say they have been unable to penetrate the layers of secrecy surrounding the 13-year-old case.

Rep. Morris K. Udall, D-Ariz., chairman of the House Interior Committee, who swore in July 1977 "to get to the bottom" of the events surrounding the disappearance of 206 pounds of highly enriched uranium from a plant at Apollo, Pa., admitted yesterday he's having a hard time getting there.

In response to a letter from an environmental group, the Natural Resources Defense Council, asserting that Udall's staff has failed to "aggressively pursue" the investigation, he ticked off a number of difficulties, including the fact that his staffers, despite security clearances, continue to have difficulty gaining access to classified materials on the matter.

"IT CONTINUES to be that many people wish the matter would be left to rest," said Udall.

Despite the roadblocks, the staff apparently has unearthed enough evidence to convince Udall that the nuclear material — enough to make 11 small weapons — was diverted or stolen, rather than lost in various waste processes as claimed by the company and the Atomic Energy Commission.

In a recent interview with the British Broadcasting Co., Udall stated: "If someone had to have me write in an envelope whether a diversion occurred or didn't occur, and I were going to be put to death if I answered wrong, I suspect I'd have to put in the envelope that I believe there is a diversion."

The inability to reach the records that might solve the Apollo case has also exasperated investigators at the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, where officials recently had to admit

that an NRC official who told two congressional committees there was "no evidence" of a diversion at Apollo had misled the committees.

The company that was processing the uranium when it disappeared was the Nuclear Materials and Equipment Corp., or NUMEC. It was headed by Dr. Zalman Shapiro, a former AEC weapons scientist who currently heads the fusion research program at Westinghouse.

The NRC yesterday released a long memo by Thomas McTiernan, who retired last month after conducting a lengthy investigation of the case. In the memo, McTiernan said he felt "... there is an aura or atmosphere about NUMEC/Apollo that leaves one with a strange feeling that there is some kind of story to be told, something that, for some reason, has not yet been said. I don't know whether there is such a story, but, looking back, there are certain questions that now cross my mind."

In the memo, which is remarkably frank for the head of a normally closed-mouthed investigative unit, McTiernan points to the files of "the agencies involved at the time, such as the CIA, FBI, JCAE (Joint Committee on Atomic Energy), ERDA (Energy Research and Development Administration)" and to Shapiro, who, McTiernan said "should be given an opportunity, if he chooses, to answer publicly the shadowy charges that have been leveled against him over these many years."

McTiernan vehemently denied an allegation by James Conran, the NRC safeguards analyst who first uncovered the NUMEC incident, that McTiernan had earlier investigated Conran in an attempt to impugn his findings.

JUST WHAT EXISTS at the core of "sensitive" records held by the government on the NUMEC matter is unknown. A recent slip-up at the NRC, involving the accidental release of a page of secret testimony from a former CIA official, Carl Duckett, indicated the possibility of a cover-up among the nation's highest officials.

Duckett had been explaining how the CIA had developed a chain of evidence, some of it circumstantial, that led it to believe there may have been a link between the uranium missing from Apollo and CIA evidence that Israel had made nuclear weapons some time in the mid-1960s.

According to the testimony, in 1968 when former CIA head Richard Helms reported Israel's new A-bomb capability to then President Lyndon Johnson, Johnson said:

"Don't tell anyone else, not even Dean Rusk (then secretary of state) and Robert McNamara (then secretary of defense)."

Helms has since said that he can't remember the meeting. Shapiro has called reports linking the missing NUMEC material to Israel "ridiculous."

Some time after the early NUMEC investigations, which included at least one FBI investigation, Shapiro's security clearance was quietly allowed to expire. Currently, however, he has two research proposals pending before the Department of Energy.

One of them, according to DOE, would involve access to classified research regarding laser fusion, which is a possible new energy source as well as top secret technology used in the nation's hydrogen bomb program.

Currently there are at least three other investigations under way into the NUMEC incident:

- The inspector general at DOE is exploring the statements of past and present energy officials regarding the incident.
- The FBI is still interviewing former AEC employees and others involved in the case in the early 1960s as part of a new investigation that began in 1976. The Justice Department has repeatedly resisted the attempts of congressional investigators to pry into its NUMEC files, claiming that the case is still "open."
- The General Accounting Office is finishing a massive investigation which, according to several sources, will conclude that the NUMEC matter poses serious questions that cannot be answered by the GAO because its investigators have not been allowed access to the most sensitive government files on the case.